Educational Agenda: Rahm Emmanuel

By: L. Glenzer

I have mixed feelings about Rahm Emmanuel’s Educational plan. The first of his three basic points, empowering principles with more autonomy, in my opinion, is a great idea for the neighborhood school that has specific problems due to location and student population. There are some things at my school that get pushed by the district area chief for all schools in our area, when most of the schools in the area are small military academies with selective enrollment, our school is a large urban neighborhood school open to anyone. The principal at our school knows the population and atmosphere of the school and I believe should have more power than he is currently receiving to shape and improve his specific school. I believe he would be more effective as a leader without having to answer to the generalities of a district area. Rahm’s second point, giving teachers the resources they need to succeed and rewarding them for excellence, sounds great and unrealistic. Giving teachers the resources they need – a significant increase in spending - in a time of massive educational deficits in the schools and government doesn’t seem truthful or feasible. His third point, providing parents with more information about their child’s education sounds like something that makes sense but lacks specifics on what information will be given, in what way it will be communicated, and how effective it will actually be on student learning. In my experience at a neighborhood school in the inner city there are parents that care and parents that don’t. Giving more information will help parents stay informed, but not necessarily increasingly involved. I think something better can be brought to the table besides “more information” in getting parents active in their child’s education.

The Chicago education fund sounds interesting in rewarding schools but is unclear on how schools will be measured. How do you measure parent involvement, how do you measure the training and support of teachers other then professional development days or college classes, or stating “new and innovative ways” of gaining results through what will most likely be standardized test scores. I found it interesting how in the report the funding for this would come from unknown sources described as private investment, and then underwritten by CPS budget surplus. Even stating the future CPS budget surplus seems absurd in a time where the district is in its worst financial shape EVER. The Chicago leadership Academy as well was stated as being funded by philanthropy and district investments. I am wondering why Chicago Public Schools has to pay for a school to train principles when everyone else has to pay for their education and training out of their own pocket although I may be misunderstanding that point.

Rahm’s “make performance matter” point about a new teacher evaluation system sounds intriguing but lacks any detail in contrasting it with the system we have now. Evaluating and measuring teacher’s performance is a hot topic but no real solid solution has come to fruition. The idea of getting bad teachers out the door and keeping the most effective ones seems like a no brainer, but obstacles like tenure and no real way to measure a teacher’s effectiveness stand in the way. I guess a question that should be debated is whether standardized tests are an accurate measure to rate teacher performance and effectiveness. If you do that you’re putting teacher’s jobs in the hands of students and diverse school populations, drastic socio-economic differences from school to school, which I don’t agree with. If a teacher is being effective scores should rise but to be rated solely on that is absurd considering the momentous amount of variables that factor into student learning.

The signed agreement between parents, schools, and teachers on expectations and learning at home is a good idea but won’t move mountains or create sweeping change. Many teachers including myself already do have contracts with students and parents and have been doing it for years. I’ve had positive results but in the end I have an extremely hard time trying to effect what happens after my student leaves the classroom and how they spend their time at home, or an extended solid influence over how parents raise their children.

Replacing the assistant principal with a director of family and community engagement title and duties seems a little out of the box but in the end remains to be seen whether that would make things better or worse. I like the idea of community and parent outreach but Emmanuel does not seem to come up with any concrete way of proving he can do that. Distributing an AP’s job duties on the teaching staff seems ludicrous, especially with all the other non-instructional duties already expected of teachers, AND with limited and ever decreasing planning time.

The parent trigger program is a waste of time considering that if a school is severely failing it is probably due largely to parents that are not involved, so I can’t see them suddenly getting involved to shut the school down. Parents that care will probably get their students out of that school long before any petition goes out. I feel like this program was created to give more power to parents to stimulate them to care more about there Childs education. Will it work? I’m not feeling very optimistic on the success of this program benefiting student learning.

Giving students more learning time such as extending the school day and year makes sense but where’s the money to back that up. Again another great idea that is unrealistic due to budget constraints and impossible contract battles. The negotiations will be brutal with the teachers union on that front and in the end if it does happen it seems like the only party losing out will be the teachers. I do believe that increasing classroom time would be great for student learning, but can the schools afford to do that, will the taxpayers support paying more out of their pocket, or will teachers just be given more duties to perform, work longer hours, have more expected of them, be rated by students, and get paid less . It’s hard to be optimistic about our future mayor.